

“Tosca’s Fatal Flaw”

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PRIDE, ENVY, GREED: FROM CAIN TO PRESENT

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A few years ago, I was at a performance of Puccini’s opera *Tosca* in a small farm community where opera was a fairly new commodity. After the second act ended, with the villain Scarpia’s corpse lying center stage, I overheard a young, wide-eyed woman say to her companion, “I knew she was upset, but I didn’t think she’d *kill* him!”

The deaths of all three protagonists in *Tosca*—the opera diva Floria Tosca, her lover Mario Cavaradossi and the corrupt police chief Baron Vitellio Scarpia—are absolutely necessary because the play it is based upon (*La Tosca*, written for Sarah Bernhardt by Victorien Sardou in 1887) is written in a quasi-neoclassic style. It aspires, as we shall see, to be a Greek-style tragedy, in which a fatal flaw leads everyone to their doom: in this play, that flaw is Tosca’s sin of envy, or jealousy.

Ex. 1: Sarah Bernhard and P. Berton in Sardou's *La Tosca*



It may seem odd that a work so clearly anti-clerical invokes the concept of sin: Scarpia puts on a show of religious piety, but admits that his lust for Tosca “makes him forget God” while Cavaradossi, the revolutionary hero, is an avowed atheist. Tosca, although she is devout, still manages to carry on an unmarried love affair and commits murder—although she pardons her victim afterwards. And as late as the first printed libretto of the opera (not the play), Cavaradossi cries out, "Ah, there is an avenging God!" [Ah, c'è un Dio vendicator!] instead of the current “Victory!” [Vittoria!] at the climactic moment when he reveals his Napoleonic sympathies. Perhaps this faith-affirming line would have made the hero more palatable to the more religious Italian audience members. In any case, the line was

eliminated, probably by Puccini, for whom such a quick conversion would have seemed unrealistic.

Indeed, sinfulness seems to permeate the very fabric of this opera. The most obvious is *Lust*: Scarpia desires Tosca, Tosca Cavaradossi, and Cavaradossi Tosca. The hero, in his last moments, thinks not of patriotic causes, but of the intimate moments during which he and the diva made love, in his aria “And the stars shone” [E lucevan le stelle]. Apparently Sarah Bernhardt understood this steamy aspect of the drama. After seeing Bernhardt in the play in Omaha, American author Willa Cather wrote: “Art is Bernhardt’s dissipation, a sort of Bacchic orgy.”¹ Even Puccini himself succumbed to the opera’s sex appeal and kept for himself a pornographic version of a line of text in a sketch for Tosca’s phrase, “Oh, how well you know the art of making yourself loved!” [Oh come la sai bene/l’arte di farti amare!]; a bowdlerized rendering of his private lyric might read, “Oh, how well you know the art of getting in my pants!”²

Although the Tosca of the opera is properly horrified at Scarpia’s suggestion that she trade her virtue for Cavaradossi’s life, in the original play, Floria jokes flirtatiously with the policeman when they meet at a court fête—an interchange that can be seen both as an ironic foreshadowing of what is to come, and also as a playful version of deeper, more serious sexual fantasies. In that scene, Scarpia notes that Tosca is wearing a bracelet of diamonds, rubies and sapphires, which together constitute a sort of French “tricolor” (an illegal symbol) and laughingly states that he could arrest her for wearing it:

Scarpia, *galantly*: It would be such a pleasure to have you for a prisoner.

¹ William M. Curtin, ed. *The World and the Parish, Volume 1: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 207.

² [Oh come tu sai bene l’arte d’entrarmi in fica.] This is found in an incomplete draft of Act I, housed at the Museo Puccini, Torre del Lago, Italy. The document is not dated, but Sardou’s name appears on the cover page, indicating that it was created some time after 16 February 1898.

Floria, *gaily*: In a dungeon?

Scarpia, *likewise*: And under triple lock, to prevent your escape.

Floria: And torture also, perhaps?

Scarpia: Until you love me.³

As if taking a cue from this dangerously suggestive encounter, the writer Paola Capriolo, in her novel *Vissi d'Amore*⁴ created a fantasy trope on the opera. In her version, which takes the form of Scarpia's diary, the policeman goes to hear Tosca at the opera house, spies on the diva through a window while she is making love with Cavaradossi, and, in short, becomes completely obsessed by the singer. Then, in a stunning upset of power, Tosca appears to succumb to Scarpia's desires and makes passionate love to him inside his torture chamber (while voluntarily shackled to the wall) thus bringing into reality his most exciting sexual fantasies. But, in a twist worthy of Sardou, she then tortures him by simply refusing to repeat the experience.

Then we have *Gluttony*. Scarpia's more perverted qualities are brought out by the librettists by having him eat before and after the torture scene, when he complains, "My poor dinner was interrupted." [La povera mia cena fu interrotta.] How cold, heartless—even sinful—is that? By choosing to emphasize Scarpia's gluttonous dinner, the librettists not only maximized his cruel traits, but drew attention to the food and, therefore, the knife. Symbolically, as well, this links Scarpia's punishment to his crime; his perverted pleasure becomes his pain.

³ [Scarpia, *galamment*: J'aurais plaisir à vous avoir pour prisonnière./ Floria, *gaiement*: Dans un cachot? Scarpia, *de même*: Et sous triples verrous, pour vous empêcher de fuir./ Floria: Et la torture aussi, peut-être? / Scarpia: Jusqu'à ce que vous m'aimiez.] Victorien Sardou, *La Tosca*, Act II, scene 5.

⁴Paola Capriolo, *Vissi d'Amore* (Milan: Bompiani, 1992). It has been translated into English and published as *Floria* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997).

Scarpia's abuse of his authority could also be seen as *Greed* for power, and the torture he employs as *Wrath*, although he is very self-contained, never breaking a sweat as he abuses his powerful position. (Of course the real person on whom Scarpia was based, the cruel Vincenzo Speciale, greedily loved ermine and velvet, and freely let loose his wrath on his prisoners and underlings.⁵)

No one in the opera is *Slothful*. However, in the play, as the curtain opens on Act I, we see the interior of the Church of Saint-Andréa des Jésuits with a young man stretched out, apparently asleep, upon artist's scaffolding. Immediately, the Sacristan Eusèbe enters, approaches the horizontal Gennarino and awakens him, saying, "Were you asleep? [...] Lazy! Although I am going to do the same."⁶

To appreciate the significance of the opening image of a sleeping Gennarino, let us remember the final moments of the play: then too a body (Cavaradossi's) is laid out. But is the artist really dead, or can he be awakened? The first audiences of *La Tosca* did not know that answer. The symmetrical placing of this visual/dramatic image is part and parcel of Sardou's neoclassic organization.

But it is *Jealousy* or *Envy*—Tosca's fatal flaw or "hamartia"—that is the mechanism for the destruction of all the characters. Cavaradossi is in love with Tosca, but he also admires an unknown blond woman and has painted her portrait in the church. Her identity is eventually revealed as the sister of escaped prisoner Angelotti, to whom Cavaradossi offers sanctuary in a hiding place at his villa. Cavaradossi flees with Angelotti to his villa (the location of which is known only to the lovers), thus missing a rendez-vous with Tosca at the church. Scarpia takes advantage of her disappointment by suggesting that Cavaradossi is

⁵ For further discussion of the personages behind the characters, see Deborah Burton, "The Real Scarpia: Historical Sources for *Tosca*," *Opera Quarterly*, 10/2 (Winter 1993-94): 67-86.

⁶ [Tu dors? [...] Paresseux! Je vais en faire autant.] Sardou, *La Tosca*, Act I, scene 1.

meeting secretly with the other woman. The police chief cannily knows that a jealous Tosca will lead him to Cavaradossi and the escaped prisoner—and he succeeds.

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It has been written elsewhere that Sardou's *La Tosca* is an example of the “well-made play” (*pièce bien faite*) for which the playwright was famous—and infamous.⁷ That genre can be defined as a formulaic style of drama with “its intricate complications of recoiling intrigue, its ingeniously contrived conclusion.”⁸ Created by Eugène Scribe⁹ and perfected by Sardou, the nineteenth-century French well-made play relied on skillfully planted hints to bring its plot to a satisfying denouement that would invariably reassert the status quo.

But that is not *La Tosca*, which is a tragedy more in the tradition of French dramatists Marie-Joseph Chénier (1764–1811) and Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814). Mercier wrote that the “end of tragedy is to move men’s hearts, to cause tears of pity or admiration to flow, and by all this to inculcate in men the important truths, to inspire in them a hatred of tyranny and superstition, a horror of crime, a love of virtue and liberty, a respect for laws and morality, the universal religion.”¹⁰ *La Tosca*, which portrays a woman caught in a fateful (and fatal) struggle between tyrannical royalists and republican idealists, seems to follow these guidelines.

The Sardou play comes even closer to filling the dramatic prescription set forth by Mercier, who attempted to stimulate republican virtues and unite all classes in patriotic fervor by means of the historical drama: “True tragedy should return to the practice of *Greek*

7. See, for example, William Ashbrook, *The Operas of Puccini* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 79.

8 Brander Matthews, *Inquiries and Opinions* (New York: Scribner, 1907), p. 239.

9 Auguste Eugène Scribe (1791-1861) was a French dramatist, who also wrote libretti for Adam, Auber, Meyerbeer and Offenbach. Oxford Music Online, accessed 26 November 2011.

10. Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present*, exp. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 159.

drama, which appealed to all classes, showed the people their true interests, and aroused an enlightened patriotism and love of country.”¹¹ That Sardou was fervently patriotic is a matter of public record: a year after his play *Patrie!* premièred triumphantly, the empire of Napoléon III collapsed and an unpopular provisional government was set up, during which Sardou “saved” the Tuileries from pillage by an angry Parisian mob, leading the way with a handkerchief tied to a walking stick.¹² The playwright wasted no opportunity in *La Tosca* to induce flag-waving sentiments in his audience (the last line of Act II, for example, is “Vive la France,” spoken amid the cheers of a crowd). Furthermore, the characterization of the heroine, the nature of the forces that cause the chief conflicts, and the overall structure of the play are all derived from the writings of Aristotle and Horace, in fine French neoclassical tradition.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle prescribes three dramatic unities (unity of place, time, and action), and *La Tosca* conforms to all of these: the drama takes place solely in Rome and occurs within the length of a single day. As to the final Aristotelian unity, that of action (*mythos*), one could argue that the Angelotti story is a secondary plot line, but in fact it is only the technical means by which the main characters are brought together.

Furthermore, Aristotle states that the action may be either simple or complex: the complex plot will involve “reversal” (*peripeteia*, a change of fortune to its opposite), “recognition” (*anagnorisis*, or a change from ignorance to knowledge), or both. Lastly, a tragic

11. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Du théâtre ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* (Amsterdam: E. van Harrevelt, 1773), pp. 39-40. Quoted in Carlson, *Theories*, p. 158.

12. Sardou related the events in his memoirs: “The proposition was applauded. ‘Yes, yes, go! go! . . . We will wait for you!’ . . . And, followed by the curious looks of all, we entered the large avenue, going toward the palace. The thing was so new and so unexpected that we made the first steps in silence, completely caught up in the adventure. The great way opened before us, deserted, in full sunlight. . . . And pulling out my handkerchief, I improvised a small flag with my cane.” [La proposition est acclamée. ‘Oui, oui, allez! allez! . . . Nous vous attendrons!’ . . . Et, suivis par les regards curieux de tout ce monde, nous entrons dans la grande avenue, nous dirigeant vers la Palais. La chose est si nouvelle et si imprévue que nous faisons les premiers pas en silence, tout à l’émotion de l’aventure. La grande allée s’ouvre devant nous, déserte, en plein soleil. . . . Et, tirant mon mouchoir, j’improvise avec ma canne un petit drapeau] Victorien Sardou, *Les papiers de Victorien Sardou: Notes et Souvenirs*, Georges Mouly, ed. (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1934), pp. 299-308.

figure is one with a “fatal flaw” (*hamartia*).¹³ *La Tosca* involves both many reversals and a change in its tragic heroine from ignorance to knowledge. This transformation profoundly influences her character: in the course of the drama, Floria Tosca grows from a silly, apolitical woman in love (she admires her lover’s republican moustache too much to have him shave it) to an avenging angel fighting tyranny. But, more important, her jealousy entangles her in the sociopolitical machinery that pervades the historical period: Tosca’s jealous pursuit of Cavaradossi enables Scarpia to track the escaped prisoner Angelotti to her lover’s secret villa.

Large political forces are called upon by Sardou in a manner akin to the Greeks’ use of fate, the inevitable end to which each character is drawn. The play’s Scarpia, unlike his operatic counterpart, is also driven by forces beyond his control: he must find Angelotti or lose his position and perhaps his head. In Act II, Scene 4, this is made clear to him by Queen Maria Carolina.¹⁴ The threat Scarpia faces is reiterated later in the act, when a royalist crowd calls for his death. Sardou’s Cavaradossi, because of his lineage, also seems fatefully, inexorably drawn into the conflict: his father was a republican who lived in France, and an ancestor, Luigi Cavaradossi, had had confrontations with tyrannical authorities, escaping the pope’s archers by taking refuge in the villa’s hidden well.¹⁵

13. Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, p. 19.

14 “*Maria Carolina*: Be careful that this business is not the end of you. You have some enemies. / *Scarpia*: The same ones as Your Majesty. / *Maria Carolina*: And these people would circulate nasty rumors about you. / *Scarpia*: Every day I arrest those who spread rumors about the Queen. / *Maria Carolina*: They declare that Angelotti, locked up for a year, managed to escape only eight days after you came. / *Scarpia*: They accuse me? . . . / *Maria Carolina*: His sister is rich and beautiful. / *Scarpia*: Does Your Majesty think me guilty? / *Maria Carolina*: The answer is easy. . . . Find Angelotti” [*Marie-Caroline*: Prends garde que cette aventure ne te soit fatale. Tu as bien des ennemis. / *Scarpia*: Les mêmes que Votre Majesté. / *Marie-Caroline*: Et ces gens-là font courir de mauvais bruits sur ton compte. / *Scarpia*: J’arrête journellement ceux qui calomient la reine. / *Marie-Caroline*: On constate qu’Angelotti, enfermé depuis un an, n’a réussi à s’échapper que huit jours après ta venue. / *Scarpia*: On m’accuserait? . . . / *Marie-Caroline*: Sa soeur est riche et belle. / *Scarpia*: Votre Majesté me croit coupable? . . . / *Marie-Caroline*: Ta réponse est facile. . . . Trouve Angelotti.]

15. In an early libretto version, belonging to the Archivio familiare della Casa di Giuseppe Giacosa, these two characters were conflated: Cavaradossi’s father had hidden in the well.

The playwright further emphasizes the eternal, fate-directed nature of the plot by constantly relating the current events of the play to ancient history and by choosing Rome as a setting. Here is Cavaradossi's description of the Eternal City, which proclaims the city's ancient nature while recalling the play's theme of tyrannical abuse of power—and its subversion: “In this city that has conquered the world (but on which the entire world has taken revenge by returning the favor, and every nation, in turn, has sieged and sacked it), in this Rome of the Christians and the barbarians, the Neros and the Borgias, of all the persecutors and all the victims, there is no old house, as you know, without a secret place to hide from the tyrant within or the invader without.”¹⁶

But the chief means by which Sardou recalls the classic past is in his structuring of the play on the classic model. The Roman Horace (68–65 B.C.), in his *Ars Poetica*, set forth specific rules for drama, including these two: the marvelous and the offensive should be kept offstage, and the play must contain five acts. Sardou's *La Tosca* is indeed five acts long, and, for the most part, the violence is offstage. The only exception is the murder of Scarpia—the torture scene, the suicide of Angelotti, and the execution of Cavaradossi are all out of the audience's sight.

Since Sardou conceived of his play as a neoclassic tragedy, the death of the heroine was inevitable. In fact, he did indeed insist upon Tosca's demise, an opinion that was not shared by the librettists, and that led to some conflict. They wanted Tosca to go mad rather than die in the final scene, but Sardou persisted. In a letter to Giulio Ricordi, Puccini writes: “This morning I was at Sardou's for an hour, and he told me things about the finale that will

¹⁶ [Dans cette ville, qui a conquis le monde, mais sur qui le monde entier a pris la revanche de sa servitude et que toutes les nations, à tour de rôle, ont assiégée et mise à sac; dans cette Rome des chrétiens et des barbares, des Nérons et des Borgias, de tous les persécuteurs et de toutes les victimes, il n'est pas, vous le savez, un vieux logis, qui n'ait son abri secret, contre le bourreau du dedans ou l'envahisseur du dehors.]

not work. He wants that poor woman dead at all costs! [...] perhaps he will want to kill Spoletta too? We shall see.”¹⁷

But what if the final suicide scene had not been written? Puccini scholars have long known that an alternative ending existed, but it was not until 1999 that scholar Piergiuseppe Gillio discovered it, misplaced in a stack of papers at the home of librettist Giuseppe Giacosa.¹⁸ The mad scene was opposed vehemently by Sardou, and eventually Puccini himself. It is unclear why the composer changed his mind, apparently more than once, about Tosca’s suicide, but librettist Illica remained bitter about the excising of his idea, even after the premiere: “that finale whose abolition constituted either an act of bestiality or one of insanity.”¹⁹

The mad scene shows Tosca hallucinating that she is in Venice, her native town:

The waves of the trembling
 canals kiss
 the old histories
 the old glories ...
 Don't sing, gondolier ...soft, soft ...
 I want a great silence around us
 Eternal silence with eternal love ...”²⁰

¹⁷ [stamani sono stato da Sardou per un’ora, e circa al finale, mi ha detto cose che non vanno. La vuol morta a tutti i costi quella povera donna! [...] forse vorrà far morire anche Spoletta? Vedremo.] Ibid., p. 172 (13 January 1899).

¹⁸ See Piergiuseppe Gillio, “Ci sarà talamo guizzante gondola,” In Deborah Burton, Susan Vandiver Nicassio and Agostino Ziino, eds. *Tosca’s Prism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), pp. 183-220.

¹⁹ [quel finale la cui abolizione ha costituito o un atto di bestialità o uno di pazzia.] Eugenio Gara, ed., *Carteggi pucciniani* (Milano: Ricordi, 1958), (15 January 1900), p. 192.

²⁰[L’onde dei tremuli / Canali baciano / Le vecchie istorie / Le vecchie glorie... / Non cantar gondoliero... piano, piano... / Voglio un grande silenzio a noi d’intorno.]

The text of the mad scene appears, with its references to eternity and history, to be in line with Sardou's reliance on similar imagery to create links with the past. Nevertheless, the playwright insisted upon a proper end to his tragedy, "at all costs."

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The opening that Puccini wrote for his musical setting of the work was a violent, three-chord opening that defies tonality; he even composed it without a key signature. [Ex. 2] In one gesture, all the musical spaces needed are set out: the upper line D-Eb-E is chromatic, the bass line, Bb-Ab-E, is whole-tone based,²¹ and the chords that rest upon it are diatonic. Most notably, however, this opening gesture outlines the interval of a tritone, Bb-E, which breaks the octave in two symmetrical halves. Let us keep in mind also that the tritone was commonly known in Puccini's time, and after, as the "devil in music" [diabolus in musica].

Ex. 2: autograph of the opening motive of *Tosca*, "preludio"²²



²¹ The skipped note in this whole-tone string is F#, which this author has argued is the reference tonality for Act II. Deborah Burton, "Tosca Act II and the Secret Identity of F#" in *Tosca's Prism: Three Moments of Western Cultural History*, eds. Deborah Burton, Susan Nicassio and Agostino Ziino. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), pp. 147-166.

²² The source for this autograph is not known.

If this gesture is a tonal “problem” that must eventually be reconciled within a key, pairing it with its tritone transposition would complete the octave: that is, Bb-Ab-E + E-D-Bb = Bb-Bb. This is precisely what happens at the end of Act I, where the Bb endpoint then functions as the dominant to Eb major, affirming a diatonic resolution. [Ex. 3]

Ex. 3:

Tosca, Act I ending: whole-tone-based motive resolves tonally

It is also possible to find evidence of the Bb-Ab-E pattern composed-out in the first half of Act I: joined with the initial Bb major, Tosca’s entrance music (I/25/0) is in Ab major, and the love duet (I/39/0) is in E major. There are also other expansions of the motive in the second half of the act.²³ In Act III, on the other hand, an expansion of the motive, transposed at the tritone (E-D-Bb), can be traced: when the curtain opens at III/1, we hear the E Lydian Shepherd’s song, then the play of Roman church bells, which ends with a foreground appearance of the sonorities E 4/3, D major and Bb major, outlining the transposed motive. E is reasserted with the sounding of the very low E of the Vatican’s bell (the *Campanone*) at III/7/3.²⁴ As Cavaradossi thinks about writing a note to Tosca, at III/9/4, we hear the love theme transposed to D major, which recurs at III/10/3 in a more extended version. [Ex. 4]

²³ See Deborah Burton, *An Analysis of Puccini’s “Tosca”: a Heuristic Approach to the Unifying Elements of the Opera*. (Ph.D. dissertation University of Michigan, 1995), chapter IV.

²⁴ Puccini researched the pitch of this bell and received the answer sometime before 17 January 1898, when he thanked Don Pietro Panichelli for the information. Eugenio Gara. ed. *Carteggi Pucciniani*. (Milan: Ricordi, 1958), p. 157.

Ex. 4: graphs of Acts I and III

Act I

opening motive - expanded

I/0 I/25 I/39

E_b minor: B_b A_b E V I

Act III

opening motive - transposed and expanded

III/1-4 III/9-10 III/41

E D B_b = V I

The completion of the pattern—when the transposed motive arrives back at home at B_b—is marked by Tosca’s final cry, “Oh, Scarpia, before God!” [O Scarpia avanti a Dio!] at III/41/0, just before the climactic cadence to E_b minor. Thus, the composing-out of B_b-A_b-E in Act I, mirrored in that of Act III on E-D-B_b, could be considered a large-scale prolongation of the dominant B_b: the tonal “problem” resolved. One might even posit that if the “Devil” is in the tritone B_b to E, then “God” can be found once more in the return to B_b, the musical sin absolved.

We have seen that the underlying organization of *Tosca*’s score is very tightly controlled: it follows symmetrical pathways laid down by the initial motivic material, ultimately leading to a straightforward resolution in E_b minor. It is almost inevitable. Perhaps Puccini was listening to Sardou after all.